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Macro Self-Portraiture and the Feminine Grotesque

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MACRO SELF-PORTRAITURE AND THE FEMININE GROTESQUE

by

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Abstract

According to the Mirriam-Webster online dictionary, "grotesque" is defined as "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature." Originating from the Old Italian *grottesca*, cave painting, feminine of *grottesco* of a cave, from the time of its conception, the grotesque has been inexorably linked to art and the female. The work of other female artists that explore themes of the feminine grotesque are discussed, including Katheryn Wakeman, Jenny Saville, and Maria Lassnig. In my current work, I have been creating oil paintings of macro images of my own body to construct a fragmented and magnified, borderless, grotesque view of the body. The images focus on the mouth, due to its complicated nature as both internal and external, hidden and in plain sight, as well as due to connotations with speech, ingestion, and sexuality. The work walks a fine line between aesthetically pleasing while also commanding an uncomfortably visceral, fleshy quality. While the works are somewhat ambiguous and allow for various readings, they also allude to larger issues of sexism. The use of magnification and fragmentation references the insufficient representation of the female body both art historically —with the beautiful female nude painted by the male artist—as well as contemporarily in an overly-Photoshopped society. The visceral feeling of disgust should allow viewers to commune with their own bodies' psychophysiological reactions and question the politics of how beauty standards are established as well as whether beauty is a valuable concept when judging the female form.

Keywords: self-portraiture, feminist, grotesque, oil painting, magnification

Macro Self-Portraiture and the Feminine Grotesque

According to the Mirriam-Webster online dictionary, "grotesque" is defined as "a style of decorative art characterized by fanciful or fantastic human and animal forms often interwoven with foliage or similar figures that may distort the natural into absurdity, ugliness, or caricature." It is a word for the 'other,' often focusing on physical, bodily difference that makes the other repulsive. Originating from the Old Italian *grottesca,* cave painting, feminine of *grottesco* of a cave, from *grotta,* from the time of its conception, the grotesque has been inexorably linked to art and the female. The female form has often been viewed as grotesque: bleeding monthly appears as a supernatural grotesque, and the body, with heavy breasts and curves seemed to caricature the more angular male form. And women became even more grotesque during pregnancy, seeming to defy the rules of nature, shifting to an even more exaggerated shape and simultaneously holding two bodies in one (Meskimmon, 8). Furthermore, women were held liable for the continuation of the grotesque in the world. After all, they were responsible for bearing future generations of grotesque forms. Traditionally, birth defects were supposedly the fault of the mother's engagement in witchcraft, bestiality, or simply having negative thoughts during conception (Braidotti as cited in Meskimmon, 8).

Even today, the association between female bodies and the grotesque remains. Female standards of beauty are narrowly defined and strictly enforced through advertising, media representations, and eventually internalized and dispelled through shaming of women by women. Any female body that does not fit this claustrophobic mold is viewed as grotesque and other. Fortunately, there are many important female artists trying to explore and combat these issues. Some try to redefine beauty standards;

others wish to do away with the association of beauty on the female form altogether and allow an interrogation with our own visceral, bodily experiences of emotions such as disgust. Still others' works illicit an appreciation of the female form as a source of human connectedness, strength, and capability.

Katheryn Wakeman

Katheryn Wakeman is a female British artist. Her work depicts the grotesque and monstrous through self-portraiture. Her works portray extreme close-up images of the body, often focusing on precise detail of the body such as skin cells, pores, and hairs or particular marks on the body such as tattoos, scars, birthmarks (Katheryn Wakeman, "Artist's Statement"). Magnification lends itself to a reading of close scrutiny as well as engulfing the viewer in the reality of the body, and fragmentation acts as a metaphor for fragmentation of the self. Her work is thematically consistent with the monstrous and grotesque, as the bodies in her images, if we could see them in their entirety, would be immensely, unnaturally large. However, we can only see a small fragment of the body, making it ambiguous and borderless, unknown and unnatural.

She seems to reappropriate the ideas of the monstrous and grotesque female form as something powerful and even beautiful while critiquing the social factors that cause the female body to be viewed as monstrous. On her work, Wakeman says, "My practice originates from the position of woman and artist and is an enquiry into the world within those terms. I'm looking at skin as the border, the interface of the living, and usually breathing biological individual and the culture that they inhabit with all its usual mores, the skin speaks of that experience. It is both a screen and a bearer of information, compliant to medical science yet a tight and unyielding symbol, it is full of paradoxes."

One way that Wakeman comments on the weight of social mores borne by the skin is by working with non-traditional tools and mediums such as painting with cosmetic brushes and powders or drawing with eye liner or lip pencil on glass, silk, or gauze to critique the beauty industry marking skin. Additionally, her titles often incorporate wordplay that speaks to the superficial nature of the beauty industry. For example, *Eye Shadows 16* depicts a pore and vein laden nose and heavy, dark shadowed under-eye bag. Perhaps the only "real" eye shadows of the body, they are precisely the ones that the beauty industry implores women to conceal, only to buy their products to paint on a coveted, fake shadow elsewhere above the eye. Her color palette is often monochrome or muted, in stark contrast to the raucous, vibrant, and overstimulated colors in cosmetic advertising. In *Pore Over* 1, Wakeman seems to utilize the cool, blue glow of a computer screen as the only light source on her skin, causing the skin to appear unnaturally blue and purple, further marking it as other and making readings ambiguous. The lighting is both familiar and soothing and also disorienting and certainly a commercial photography sin, breaking advertising norms in order to better portray unflatteringly pedestrian figures.

Jenny Saville

Jenny Saville is a Scottish born, London-based artist who works mainly in drawing and oil painting. Her works often depict female nude figures, a classic motif in painting, although her representations are anything but classic. Saville's figures tend to be larger than life, both in the scale of the canvas and in their physique. When she paints women, they are large and bulking; they contain none of the thin gracefulness of traditional beauty, but rather are substantive and heavy. The figures are often painted

from unusual forced perspectives—such as in *Propped* (1992), where the forward protrusion of the subject's legs causes them to be significantly larger than the rest of the body—and sometimes various bodies or progressions of one body in time are painted together into one conglomerate form (e.g. *Fulcrum*, 1999). Saville has also painted transsexual bodies, such as in *Matrix* (1999) and *Passage* (2004), stating her interest in, "The idea of floating gender that is not fixed. The transvestite I worked with has a natural penis and false silicone breasts. Thirty or forty years ago this body couldn't have existed and I was looking for a kind of contemporary architecture of the body. I wanted to paint a visual passage through gender – a sort of gender landscape," (Saatchi Gallery). These transsexual bodies can be seen to fit within the grotesque as defined by elements of two traditionally distinct entities culminating in one. But Saville's paintings do not decry these new bodily possibilities but rather act as an exploration, if not a celebration, of them.

Saville's works are as much about the subject as they are about paint. Her enjoyment of the medium is obvious in her fresh, wide brush strokes, thick with paint, overlapping a myriad of other strokes below. As Donald Kuspit, professor of art history and philosophy at Stonybook, so well described, "her colors are bold yet subtle." Jolts of lime green and bright turquoise are not commonly associated with the color of skin, but Saville incorporates them with such a wide but subtle gradient from green to brown to white and gray that no one color seems out of place in the portrayal of the figure. Through the use of paint, the subjects are at once immediately recognizable as fully-fledged and beautifully rendered human figures and yet unsettlingly unfamiliar in their overall color, posture, and dead gazes. Stylistically, Saville has been said to range

between realism, expressionism, and abstraction, with some critics even claiming that she has reinvented expressionism (Kuspit). This claim certainly seems consistent with Saville's personal comments on painting, stating, "I have to really work at the tension between getting the paint to have the sensory quality that I want and be constructive in terms of building the form … I think of each mark or area as having the possibility of carrying a sensation," (Saville as cited in Saatchi Gallery).

Saville's work has received mixed criticism, with much praise from fat liberation supporters and then other appalled critics describing the work as "cruel, intense, fetishistic, unforgiving, and extremely shocking" (Milner 1997 as cited in Meagher 2003, 27). But, while both reactions were likely predicted by Saville, both are superficial and seem to rush past the true nature of the work in favor of sensationalism. Saville is not trying to portray large women as deserving of a place within traditional beauty standards, as with the fat liberation movement, nor is she trying to degrade her subjects by portraying them unflatteringly. The work forces viewers to question the politics of beauty standards and the disgust that accompanies bodies that do not fit those standards. Her figures are enormous, overlapping, androgynous, with ill-defined borders, and an excess of flesh—all elements that define the monstrous and grotesque (Meskimmon). These visual tactics are utilized precisely to produce disgust in viewers so that they can then question the biological, sociocultural, or even existential internalizations that caused that disgust. This raises an even greater question as to why the feeling of disgust has itself become abhorrent instead of communing with the body and letting oneself feel disgust (Drohojowska-Philp, 2002 as cited in Meagher, 29). So, in a very real way, Saville makes her viewers experience their own bodily grotesquerie at a gut level.

In some works, Saville even brings this message home more firmly through the use of titling or text. In *Propped* (2002), overlaid on the figure is mirrored text, scratched into the paint that reads, "If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other…" (Meagher, 25). Men, through art and other positions of power, have traditionally been the definers and disseminators of what is considered beautiful in a woman's body. Saville, then, is suggesting not only redefining feminine standards of beauty to be more inclusive, but rather to reject the idea of beauty as an essentially unproductive if not oppressive concept. Saville claims, "We need a new language, a women's language, so that we don't have to take on maleness to be successful," (Henry, 1994 as cited in Meagher, 25). As women, we should be able to define ourselves and decide what concepts are applicable to our own lives and selves. The bodies in Saville's works may be grotesque, not beautiful, but who is to say that grotesqueness is any less valuable a trait than beauty?

Maria Lassnig

Maria Lassnig is another female artist whose work focuses on representations of her own body. Although she has worked in film and has experimented with photography as source imagery, Lassnig is best known for her painted and drawn self-portraits. For the creation of these works, Lassnig has a strict, slow process, which she terms "body sensation" and "body awareness" in which she sits or lays in one position and paints only what she can percieve of her body (Lang, 66). She does not work from source images or even mirrors, and, often, she closes her eyes to limit the conventions of sight and become more aware of the sensations of her body (Moyer, 70). In most of her paintings, features of the body have been left out, such as the top of the head or an arm, because Lassnig

could not sense them while painting, while other features are exaggerated, and yet others morph into inhuman forms. Through this process, Lassnig represents internal states as directly influencing external form.

The internal states are as emotional as they are physical. This becomes apparent in Lassnig's use of color. More often than not, the works include a veritable playground of color, with bright orange, chartreuse, and a rainbow of pastel hues (*Sciencia 2*, 1998). The colors are lively and dreamlike, pleasant and yet disquieting in their unfamiliar otherworldliness, such as large planes of the forehead comprised of bright turquoise, certainly not a natural look.

Due to her self-reflective and stream of consciousness process of painting as well as her refusal to use any source material but what she can visualize mentally, most critiques of her paintings categorize the work as surrealist and make no mention of the grotesque. While surrealism seems an appropriate characterization, and Lassnig did meet several influential surrealists including André Breton and Benjamin Peret, whom she openly cite as inspiration for her work (Moyer, 72), surrealism seems like an overarching term, under which the grotesque may also be thematically present in Lassnig's work. Referring back to the very definition of the grotesque, the term seems pertinent as her work utilizes many of its distinguishing elements such as creating figures that are borderless, monstrous, and often combined with non-human forms, such as in *Untitled (One Crutch)* (2005) and C*rutches* (2003). Lassnig's works clash against traditional beauty standards not by trying to expand the standards to include more bodies but by questioning the very reality of the physical form. Instead of valuing the physical image,

she places higher value on the psychological perception of our bodies and how emotive states and external factors are inextricably linked to our self-perceptions.

Current Work

In my current body of work, I am exploring ideas of the feminine grotesque through large-scale, realistic oil paintings of close-up images of liminal spaces on my own body, particularly in the mouth due to its complex nature as not covered but not typically granted much attention, both internal and external, and due to connotations with speech, consumption, and sexuality. The paintings are often visually ambiguous upon first view and only after some examination does the actual body space depicted become clear. Here I want to break down the various elements of my current practice and explain their importance to this body of work.

Painting

First and foremost, let us begin with the medium—why choose to work in oil paint? Especially since I am working near realism and referencing photographic source material, why not use photography not just as a means to an end but as the finished product? I find that for this work, painting allows for more interpretations and more viewer engagement with the work. Although painting can, in a sense, depict reality, it is not bound to it in the same way in which most photography is. Photography can have just as strong a sense of aesthetic power as painting, but I feel that if these images were left in photographic form, the viewers would focus more on figuring out what was being depicted and move on once they understood it. Most photographs may leave more visual markers for viewers to determine too quickly and simplistically what is being depicted.

Although painted fairly realistically, my work still incorporates the expressiveness possible with paint—texture, line, brush stroke, etc.—that I feel allows more breathing room for the aesthetics of the work to be appreciated instead of having the work be viewed simply as a puzzle to solve. Additionally, even a basic familiarity with painting motifs and genres allows for more varied initial readings of the work as landscape or abstraction. Hopefully these varied initial interpretations allow for a bigger "reveal" moment once identification hits the viewer. Furthermore, due to its long history, painting long acted as a medium through which beauty standards for the female form were realized, and, although the work is primarily focused on deconstructing contemporary beauty standards, it felt important to comment on the history of painting through paint itself. Finally, for my own process, I appreciate the time for personal reflection and intimacy with the work during making. Painting as an act allows me to feel more connected to the work as well as to my own body by focusing on my hand movements in the act of making as well as to the body part being depicted in the painting, as making decisions about color and form make me examine the areas of my own body in ways that I have never bothered examining them before.

Realism

Since I am interested in multifaceted readings of the piece, why bother using realism as a style? I enjoy the challenge of finding images that allow for initial readings as abstract form even with a realist style. I want to allow for a new perspective and new view of self without actually having to distort reality. Many artists, such as Lassnig, use physical distortion of the body to express emotional or psychological states or to combat oppressive social norms; however, I feel that physical distortion diminishes relatability.

If a painting is depicting something that is not "real," it is therefore not "really me" and is easier not to empathize with and therefore easier to dismiss if it portrays a hard truth. With my work, I want to show that, as the colloquialism goes, "truth is stranger than fiction."

Close-up & Scale

Taking very close-up, macro photographs of parts of my body and then painting them at a much larger scale than that in which they exist naturally is one technique that allow for various readings of the work, from abstract landscape to figurative. Again, I enjoy this fluctuation as it causes a novel visual and conceptual perspective of the body. My work focuses on very specific areas of the body that are not normally points of attention. Most of the body spaces depicted are those that are often hidden in plain sight; not covered by clothing, visible to close friends and strangers alike, but not normally the focus of much attention. The extreme close-up view allows me to depict myself without most of the typical signifiers of an individual and of my identity specifically. In fact, it allows the painting to have very few obvious signifiers of a human form. Therefore the work becomes personal to me but is not "about me." Once a viewer reaches a reading of the work as depicting a fragment of the body, it should be a largely generalizable body, allowing the viewer to empathize with the work if they so choose.

Self-Portraiture

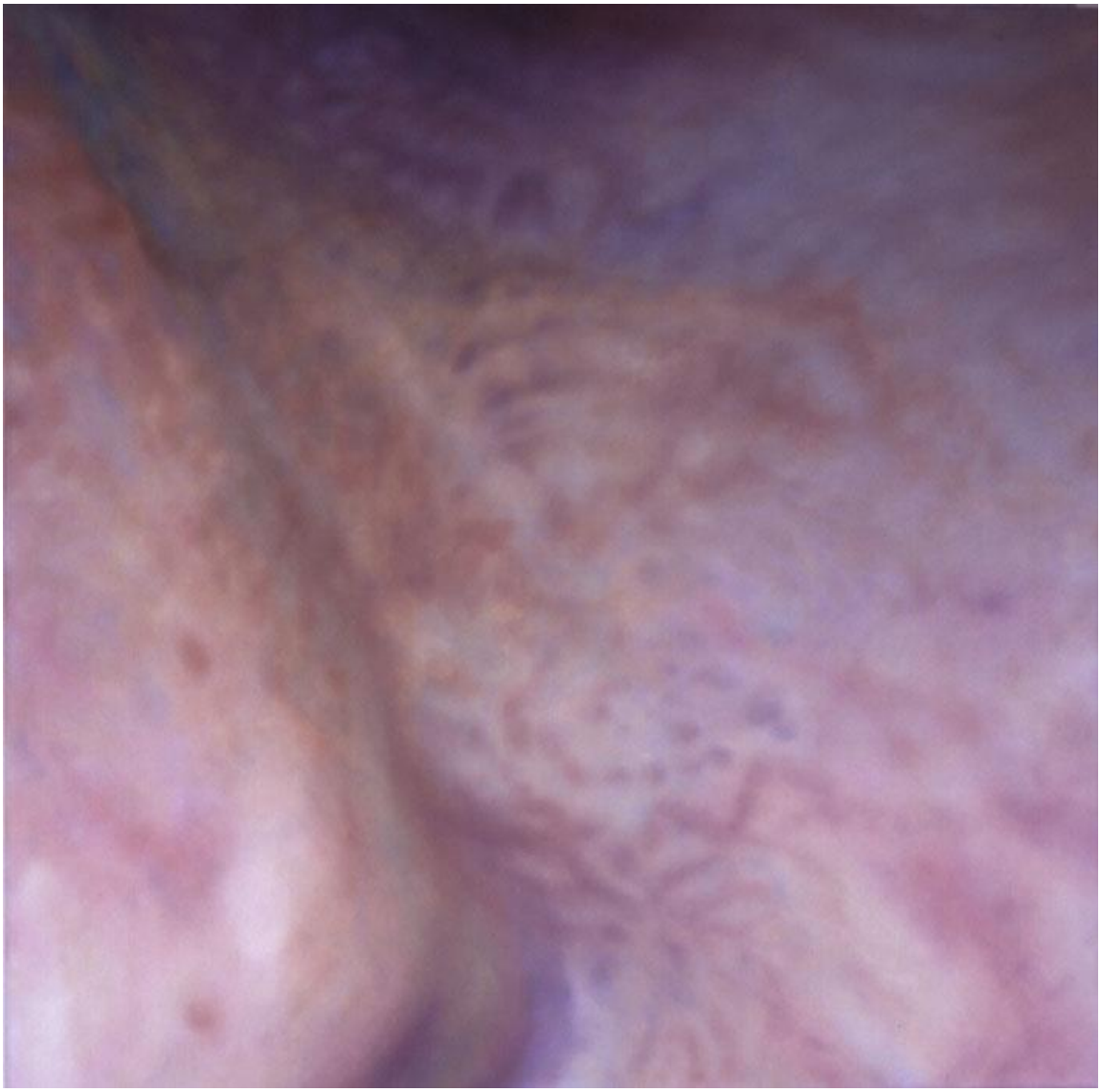
That being said, while I want the work to be generalizable, the decision to do self-portraiture was one based on more than just ease of access to the model. Self-portraits allow me to feel personally connected to the work as well as to make myself vulnerable. As mentioned previously, painting allows time for self-reflection and changes self-

perception, focusing my attention on what society says are the ugly, grotesque parts of my body. On the one hand, it is very personal and empowering to show the ugly side and take full ownership of that and come to understand these areas as useful and powerful. On the other side, the process of painting makes the connection to myself somewhat impersonal, turning every "ugly" part into a series of methodical decisions about color that eventually create finished works that provides pride in accomplishment. Ultimately, this process allows for more self-acceptance, and I would not feel as connected to the work or as if I understood it as well were it of someone else. Additionally, as empowering as I find depicting the ugly parts of myself to be, it could be degrading or humiliating for someone else to have their "ugly" features depicted for others to gaze upon. I would not want to subject anyone else to potential psychological harm, criticism, and vulnerability. Finally, having viewers know that the works are self-portraits directs any potential criticism or nefarious readings onto myself; if viewers come away with a negative reading, it does not reflect poorly on them as I chose to depict my body, not their bodies. However, as mentioned, I tried to remove most signifiers of my individual identity, so that the works can remain relatable if viewers to choose to relate.

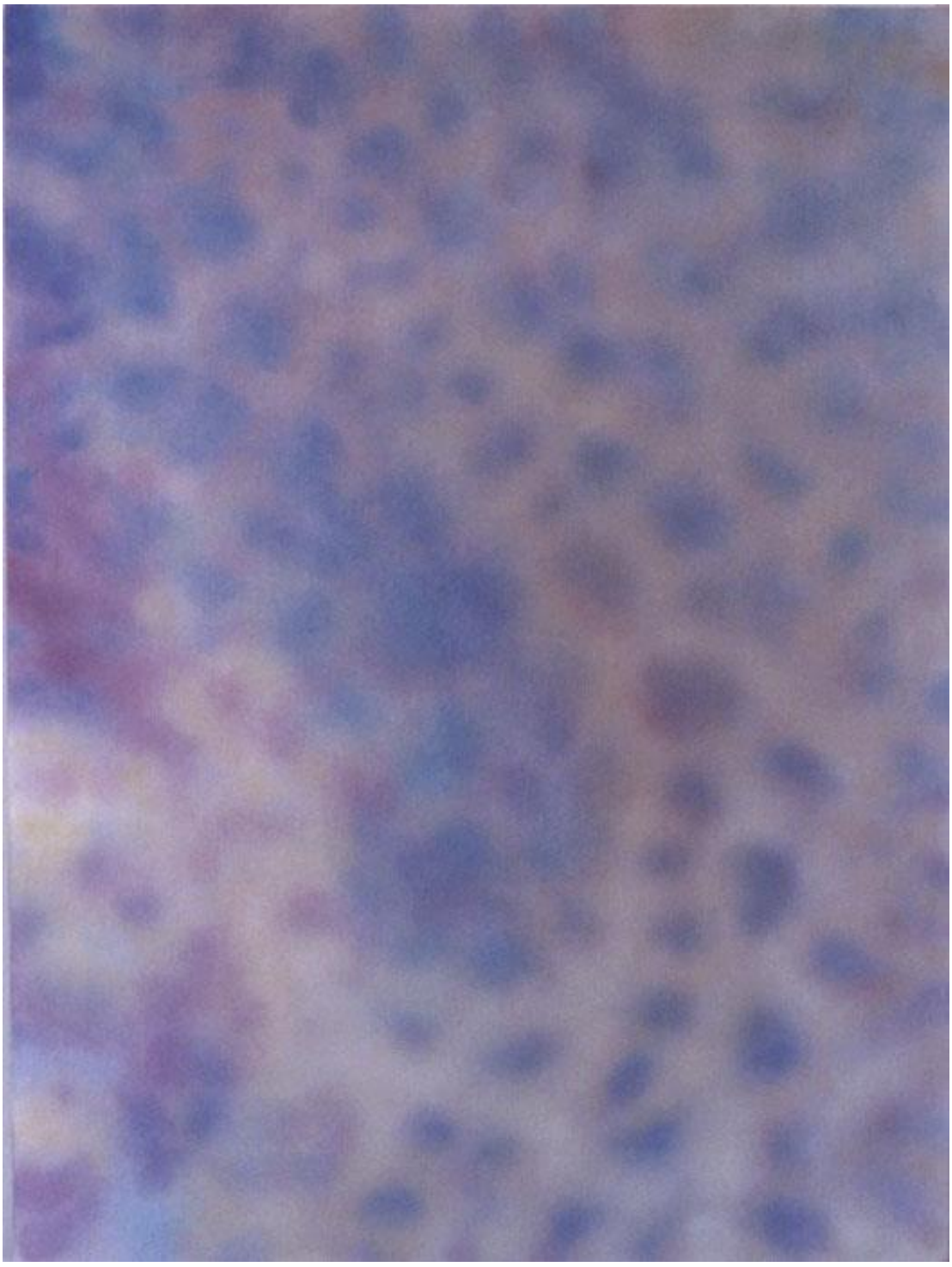
Feminine Grotesque

Finally, themes of the female or feminine grotesque are still very relevant to art and society at large. Certainly the history of the portrayal of the female form in art is one that was predominantly created by male artists depicting traditionally beautiful, often nude, women as docile objects of fantasy. Likewise today, contemporary entertainment and advertising media disseminates oversexualized portrayals of traditionally beautiful women, airbrushed to an unattainable texturelessness. Certainly I am not the first, nor

will I be the last, to try to broaden this depiction of women in art and in society, but at this point in time this effort still seems extremely pertinent. It is imperative that natural, bulbous, visceral, grotesque parts of the body are depicted, not to claim that these areas should be considered beautiful, but that they are natural, human, powerful, and necessary and should be accepted. It is necessary to attempt to break down the assumption that beautiful is the most important thing that a woman can be. I want my work to unobtrusively allow people to come to the conclusion that no woman is ever truly flawless and stereotypically physically beautiful, but that is human, and humanity is much more fulfilling.



Katheryn Wakeman
Eyeshadows 16
Oil on canvas
(Year and dimensions unknown)
http://www.gotm.talktalk.net/works_coll.html

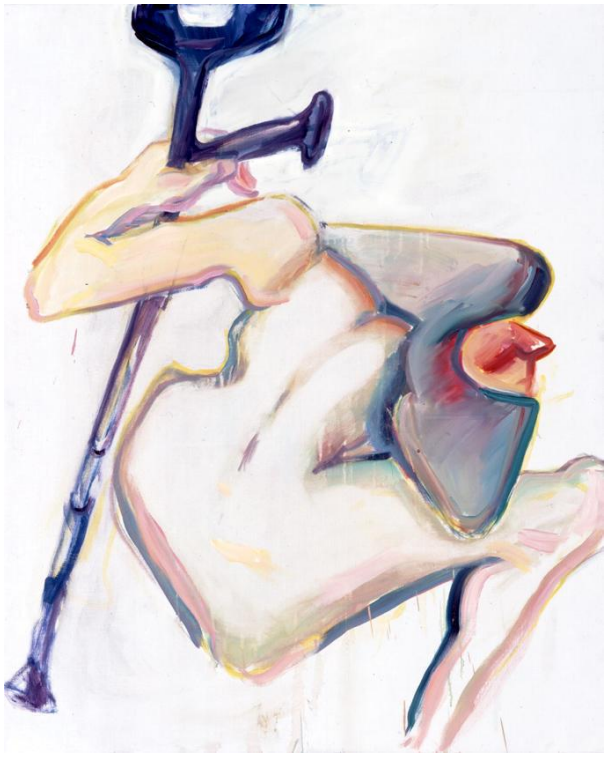


Katheryn Wakeman
Pore Over 1
Oil on canvas
(Year and dimensions unknown)
http://www.gotm.talktalk.net/works_coll.html

Jenny Saville
Propped (2002)
Oil on canvas
84 x 72 in
http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/jenny_saville.htm

Jenny Saville
Passage (2004)
Oil on canvas
132¼ x 114¼ in
http://www.saatchigallery.com/aipe/jenny_saville.htm

Maria Lassnig
Sciencia 2 (1998)
Oil on canvas
59 x 78 ¾ in
http://momaps1.org/exhibitions/view/376



Maria Lassnig
Untitled (One Crutch) (2005)
Oil on canvas
49 ¼ x 39 ¼ in
http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2005-11-19_maria-lassnig/

Maria Lassnig
Crutches (2003)
Pencil and watercolor on paper
17 ¼ x 23 ½ in
http://www.petzel.com/exhibitions/2005-11-19_maria-lassnig/

Emily Wages
Tasteless (2015)
Oil on canvas
36 x 60 in

Emily Wages
Uncensored (2015)
Oil on canvas
36 x 60 in

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